Ashanti

The Asanti region of southern Ghana is a remnant of the Ashanti Empire, which was founded in the early 17th century when, according to legend, a golden stool descended from heaven into the lap of the first king, Osei Tutu. The stool is believed to house the spirit of the Ashanti people in the same way that an individual's stool houses his spirit after death. In traditional Asante society, in which inheritance was through the maternal line, a woman's essential role was to bear children, preferably girls.

The art of Ashanti can be classified into two main groups: metalwork (casts of brass or gold using a lost-wax method and objects made of hammered metal sheets) and woodcarvings. Fertility and children are the most frequent themes in the wooden sculptures of the Asante. Thus the most numerous works are akua 'ba fertility figures and mother-and-child figures called Esi Mansa. The acua 'ba are dolls with disk-shaped heads embodying their concept of beauty and carried by women who want to become pregnant and to deliver a beautiful child.

Kente cloth originates from the Ashanti people. The Ashanti people hand weave bright multicolored clothes for their kings and noblemen. The tradition of kente cloth is said to have been developed in the 17th century, and stems from ancient Akan weaving techniques dating as far back as the 11th century AD (this is one of Africa’s textile tradition). Kente cloth is known as nwentoma (meaning woven cloth) in Akan language, and is a type of silk or cotton fabric made of interwoven cloth strips which is native to the Akan/Ashanti ethnic group. It is woven on a wooden loom, which produces a band about 10 cm wide; several bands will then be sewn together to make a larger cloth. The elaborate patterns arise from the mixture of different weaving techniques applied to the same band of cloth. The quality of the fabric, and weaving indicates the rank of the person, the best being reserved for the kings. It is worn by men as a toga, and by women as upper and lower wrappers. The art of weaving kente is passed down only to males, from generation to generation.

Bobo

The Bobo live in eastern Burkina Faso and also in Mali.

Living in a region of dry savannas where harvests depend on rainfall, the Bobo instituted a series of purification rituals in order to reconcile with nature. Since it is proper to make amends for the errors of humankind, masks have the essential function of erasing evil and reinstating the God-given balance between sun, earth, and rain. At the end of the dry season and before the work of cultivation begins, purification ceremonies take place, using masks of leaves, of fiber and wood, which may represent Dwo (their creator) or protective spirits: warthog, male buffalo with flat horns, rooster with its crest standing perpendicular to its face, toucan, fish, antelope, serpent, and hawk. All of them incarnate the forces of fertility, fecundity, and growth. The masks symbolize animals or spirits and are worn during ceremonies associated with new crops, initiations and
funerals. Among the Bobo, the sacredness of the mask derives from the fact that the divinity is considered to be present in the mask and, through it to be acting.

**Baule**

The Baule belong to the Akan peoples who inhabit Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. According to a legend, during the eighteenth century, the queen, Abla Poku, had to lead her people west to the shores of the Comoé, the land of Senufo. In order to cross the river, she sacrificed her own son. This sacrifice was the origin of the name Baule, for *baouli* means “the child has died.” Now about one million Baule occupy a part of the eastern Côte d’Ivoire between the Komoé and Bandama rivers that is both forest and savanna land.

Baule art is sophisticated and stylistically diverse. Non-inherited, the sculptor’s profession is the result of a personal choice. The Baule have types of sculpture that none of the other Akan peoples possess. Wooden sculptures and masks allow a closer contact with the supernatural world. Baule statues are usually standing on a base with legs slightly bent, with their hands resting on their abdomen in a gesture of peace, and their elongated necks supporting a face with typically raised scarification and bulging eyes. The coiffure is always very detailed and is usually divided into plaits.

The Baule are also noted for their fine wooden sculpture, particularly for their ritual figures representing spirits; these are associated with the ancestor cult. The Baule have also created monkey figures *gbekre* that more or less resemble each other. Endowed with prognathic jaw and sharp teeth and a granular patina resulting from sacrifices, the monkey holds a bowl or a pestle in its paws. Sources differ on its role or function: some say it intervenes in the ritual of divination, others that it is a protection against sorcerers, or a protective divinity of agrarian rites, or a bush spirit. The figures and human masks are elegant -- well polished, with elaborate hairdressings.

**Binji**

Today the 35,000 Binji are scattered across a vast area along the eastern border of the Kuba kingdom. In this region overrun by innumerable shifts of population, groups of diverse origins coexisted in the same villages: in the identical local one might find Lega, Bemba, Buyu, Bangubangu and Binji, all of whose primary activity would be the hunt. Their origin myth suggests Kuba ancestry. Historically, the Binji people split from the Bushoong clan over a disagreement about the initiation process. Each family has a sanctuary. Binji artists carved rougher-looking helmet masks similar in style to the Bushoong *bwoom* mask and woven fiber masks used during initiation ceremonies. Masks are powerfully formed, and it has been suggested that one type may be the prototype for the *bwoom* type of mask of the Kuba. The art forms such as elaborate pipes, cups for palm wine, and oracles in the shape of animals are very like those of the Kuba.

**Guere**

The art of Guere and Wobe people is stylistically connected and both groups are often collectively referred to as We, meaning "men who easily forgive." The We use a wide variety of
masquerades, which hold important regulatory position within their small, egalitarian communities. Masks are owned by families and used by individual lineage members in contexts of social control, boy’s circumcision camps and entertainment. Most We masks were created to frighten with the gaping jaws and tubular eyes. The style of these forest living people differ from the sophisticated, gentle and often refined art of the neighboring savanna-dwellers. We people produce a variety of masks often characterized by enlarged triangular nose, an open mouth and tubular eyes.

**Guro**

With a population of 200,000 the Guro live west of the Baule on the Côte d’Ivoire, in a heterogeneous area of free-filled savannas and dense tropical forest.

The art of the Guro is distinguished by extreme refinement. The Guro style has one or two distinguishing marks: the face of the human mask is usually longish while the forehead and bridge of the nose form an elegant S-shaped profile. The tattoo pattern cut in relief on forehead and cheeks is a repetition of the short protruding tattoo marks on the men’s faces. Another characteristic of many Guro masks is the broad, wooden collar that serves as a fixture for the raffia cloak. There are polychrome, as well as black and brown polished masks. There is a much stronger tendency than with the Baule to add animal features to the human face — elephant’s ears, or a superstructure in the shape of a cockerel’s or other bird’s head. The hairdo is often carved in elaborate geometrical patterns, surmounted by horns or a totem animal. In some the nose forms an animal-like beak. Rather well known is the zamble mask combining the features of hyena, crocodile (or leopard) and antelope. Most of them are polychrome. There are also human masks with long horns and a superstructure in the form of one or two human figures. The masks are supplemented by voluminous, multipartite costumes of palm-frond strips or reed-grass, which completely conceal the dancer’s body. At ceremonies the Je animal masks are the first to appear, and they prepare the audience for the performance of the more powerful, anthropomorphic figures.

**Kuba**

Numbering about 250,000 the Kuba live in the area of central DRC bordered by the Sankuru, Kasai, and Lulua rivers.

The Kuba love of form, knowledge of materials, skill in execution, and appreciation of quality are best seen in the number and variety of cups and goblets, mostly for drinking palm wine. There are reports – not confirmed – that these cups might have been used in the poison ordeal. Among the Kuba, as among other African tribes, death was never attributed to natural causes but to malevolent spirits or to witchcraft. The person suspected of using witchcraft was required to drink poison from such a cup. If he vomited up the drink, he was declared innocent. On the other hand, his death proclaimed his guilt and constituted his punishment.
Marka

The Marka are famous for their masks and puppets. Their masks are generally carved with horns, comb or crest on top of the head and are often covered with metal sheeting. The Marka dress their masks in gaily-colored costumes made of cloth; they always appear in pairs, to represent man's courting of woman. Masks with a comb are danced in the context of adolescent boys’ initiation rites.

Mossi

The first Mossi Empire was founded by invaders from northern Ghana. Today, the Mossi are the largest ethnic group living in Burkina Faso. They number 2.2 to 3.5 million and are the only tribe of Inland West Africa to have a centralized governing body, in addition to clans and professional corporations led by elders known as zaksoba.

Mossi sculptors are mostly famous for their polychrome masks. The farmers, “children of the earth” and descendants of the autochthones, still use huge masks; formerly, these masks were regarded as the seat of the spirit, but they might also represent the totemic animal of the clan. Each family would refer to an appropriate myth explaining the mask’s origin: generally, it was most often a catastrophe that had brought a sacred animal, or even a god, to make a gift of a mask to an ancestor, the power of mask allowing the restoration of order within the clan; then, too, at the ancestor’s death the mask would become the material structure of his soul. These masks made their appearance several times during the course of the year: they would escort the dead, thus helping them to join the world beyond. They preside over the sacrifices offered at the beginning of the rainy season, which were to insure the community a good millet crop and harvest of wild fruits. They “supervised,” before the first harvest, the deference given to planted seeds corresponding to a period of famine. Between “appearances,” the masks remained on the family shrine, where they received prayers and sacrifices for those members of the family who were in need, and they aided communication with the ancestors. The mask types evince regional differences.

Senufo

The Senufo number 1,000,000 to 1,500,000 and live in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Burkina Faso, and the extreme south of Mali.

The Senufo produce a rich variety of sculptures, mainly associated with the poro society. The sculptors and metalsmiths, endogamous groups responsible for making the cult objects live on their own in a separate part of the village. The attitude shown toward them by other Senufo is a mixture of fear and respect, owing to their privileged relationship with the natural forces that they are capable of channeling in a sculpture. They created wood carvings, headpieces to be worn during initiations, female ritual statues, statuettes depicting bush spirits and equestrian figures. Ritual rings and other jewelry were cast in bronze.
Yaka

The Kwango River area (southwest of the Democratic Republic of the Congo) is the home of some 300,000 highly artistic Yaka people.

The arts of the Yaka people are very much alive today. The statues that contain magic ingredients, the *biteki (nkisi)*, are multi-functional and sometimes have contradictory roles, for example, they were used to heal and to cause illness. The medications are placed in the figure’s abdomen, which is closed up with a resin stopper, or enclosed in small bags hung around the neck or waist. All *nkisi* figures are manipulated by a diviner to activate a force which can either inflict illness or protect one’s clan from illness or harm, depending upon the particular set of circumstances. The diviner has an important position in Yaka society because he owns and activates powerful objects, including some masks that can protect or harm.

The Yaka have statues of chiefs which are not, however, portraits. These emphasize his authority by representing the chief, his many wives, his children, and his servants, gather together in the same shelter. Large, life-size carved figures stand at the entrances of Yaka initiation huts, the inside walls of which are covered with painted bark panels. The torso is highly developed; missing extremities allude to an accident that befell a hero. The Yaka give an aesthetic touch to many everyday objects such as stools, combs, pipes, headrests, and musical instruments.

Yoruba

The Yoruba people, numbering over 12 million, are the largest nation in Africa with an art-producing tradition. Most of them live in southwest Nigeria, with considerable communities further west in the Republic of Benin and in Togo.

The Yoruba gods form a true pantheon; the creator god, Olodumare, reigns over almost four hundred *orisha* (deities) and nature spirits who live among the rocks, trees, and rivers. Their figures, more often of Shango (also spelled Sango and Sagoe), deity of thunder and lightning are carved from wood and kept in shrines. Sculptors have studios in which apprentices learn the techniques of the master and his stylistic preferences. Throughout Yorubaland, human figures are represented in a fundamentally naturalistic way, except for bulging eyes; flat, protruding, and usually parallel lips; and stylized ears. Within the basic canon of Yoruba sculpture, many local styles can be distinguished, down to the hand of the individual artist.

Additional important arts include pottery, weaving, beadworking and metalsmithing.